

As you stroll through the aisles of your local grocery store this holiday season, grab an apple and a two-pack of Ho Hos. Can you guess which one your tax dollars are subsidizing?

If you guessed the Ho Hos -- packed with 370 calories from saturated fat and high-fructose corn syrup -- then you can probably also guess why Congress needs to dramatically reform the farm bill.

At a time when America's waistlines and our national debt are both reaching record levels, we are spending billions of dollars every year on subsidies for the massive agribusinesses that grow genetically modified, pesticide-laden commodity products like corn that are ultimately turned into processed foods like Twinkies. Meanwhile, growers of fruits and vegetables are on their own.

The subsidized fattening of America is not new. Since 1995, taxpayers have spent more than \$41 billion on direct commodity payments, with more than half going to just 10 percent of the farming population -- the agricultural behemoths. Many of these companies are so keenly aware that their subsidies are unnecessary and wasteful that they have lobbied to hide them from public disclosure.

Yet the average American farmer doesn't report to work in the morning wearing a corporate logo and doesn't see a dime from these subsidy payments. He or she is 57 years old, works on fewer than 500 acres of land and has less than \$100,000 in total sales. These are the family farms that America is losing at a rate of almost 50 a day as older farmers retire and small farmers struggle to make ends meet.

It's time for a farm bill that works for the average farmer. I just released a report, "Growing Opportunities: Family Farm Values for Reforming the Farm Bill," that offers a series of reforms to bring sanity to our overstuffed, inefficient agricultural policies. It offers four guiding principles:

Support small and midsize farmers: Congress should impose strict controls on payments through the commodity program to ensure that they go to smaller farms rather than giant corporations. Payments should be capped at \$250,000 to a single entity and be limited to

farmers with an adjusted gross income of less than \$250,000. To encourage a new generation of family farmers, the farm bill should also streamline the loan process and increase funding for education and training opportunities through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

Use taxpayer dollars wisely: Even in an era of tight budgets, we can support our family farmers with smarter spending. We can save \$28 billion over 10 years just by eliminating direct payments to commodity producers who feed Americans empty calories, simple sugars and saturated fat. We can also save money by ensuring that the crop insurance system supports our farmers, not crop insurance agents. Currently, for every \$1 spent on crop insurance that goes to the farmer, \$1.44 goes to crop insurance companies.

Reward farmers for protecting the environment: American agriculture depends on a healthy and fertile natural environment. Yet conservation programs that encourage farmers to reduce soil erosion and keep our water clean have been woefully underfunded, with applications for the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program exceeding available funds by two or three times over. Let's make enough funding available for growers who want to preserve healthier land for the next generation of American farmers.

Improve access to nutritious food: Nutrition spending makes up 74 percent of the farm bill, mostly through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps. With a third of adults clinically obese and a third of our children on pace to develop Type II diabetes, we face a different challenge: ensuring access to healthy, fresh food for everyone. Today's program should include more resources for nutrition counseling, encourage the use of food stamps at farmers markets, and institute a Healthy Food Financing Initiative to offer low-interest loans for businesses offering healthy food choices in underserved areas commonly known as "food deserts."

Our Farm Bill should make sense not only for America's 2 million family farmers, but also for 300 million Americans who require healthy food every day. If Washington can only muster the political will for reform, the Farm Bill can grow a stronger agricultural industry as well as a healthier nation.

Originally published Tuesday, December 20th, 2011, in The Oregonian

